

Small-Scale Food Processors Conference Held In Geneva

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By John Zakour

GENEVA, NY: "Making the Cash Register Ring," was the draw for the 70 small-scale food processors who attended the Third Annual Small-Scale Food Processing Conference, held at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, in Geneva, NY, on February 18, 2002.

"The small-scale food processors do a terrific job of bringing value-added products to market and helping New York farmers get more money for their raw products," said Dave Evans, president of the Small-Scale Food Processors Association (SSFPA). "They enhance the agricultural economic base of New York. The Food Venture Center at Geneva is a big asset for these producers."

The conference was sponsored by the SSFPA and the Northeast Center for Food Entrepreneurship (NECFE), which is based at the Experiment Station. It was preceded by the Entrepreneur Food Expo and dinner in downtown Geneva, the night before, during which Assemblyman Cliff Crouch (R-122nd) and Gary Redmond, owner of Regional Access, discussed "Specialty Products Distribution." Regional Access distributes specialty foods throughout central New York.

Assemblyman Bill Magee (D-111th), chair of the New York State Assembly's Agriculture



Paul Howard, executive director of the Genesee-Finger Lakes Regional Planning Council in Rochester, tells food processors about financial assistance that is available from the NYS Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA).
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Committee, addressed audience concerns regarding distribution networks in New York City, right-to-farm laws, and the need to establish additional USDA-approved kitchens across the state. Magee said his committee was concerned with providing producers funding opportunities as well as technical assistance to get up and running. Magee considered the conference a wonderful opportunity to talk to people who are in the small-scale food processing business. "I see a lot of growth in the value-added sector of the economy," he said.

The conference was broken into five sessions. The first session, "Financing Your Business," moderated by Alison Clarke, focused on options to finance small businesses. The entrepreneurs in attendance received information on grants, loans and other creative financing opportunities available to small-scale processors. The second session, moderated by one of the conference organizers, Amanda Hewitt, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida Co., was "Connecting Markets to Products." The session started out as a panel discussion and then broke into one-on-one discussions with market owners and distributors from around the state who have an interest in New York products. The third session, moderated by Cheryl Leach of NECFE, was titled "Incubator Kitchens: Can They Work For You?" This session explored what existing kitchens offer and presented information on what the "Incubator Kitchen Bill" means for farmers and processors. The fourth session, moderated by Kelly Flegel of the NY Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, concentrated on "Regional Chapter Development." Because each region has unique strengths and needs, processors broke up into groups by region to brainstorm about what they could do to improve their businesses.

Attendees were also given the option to tour the Food Venture Center, one of the two NECFE sites in the Northeast. Olga Padilla-Zakour, assistant professor of food science and technology, and NECFE director, led the tour.

The conference and expo was well received by all, as indicated by the following comments.

"The conference was very beneficial. We were introduced to many aids to help efforts to grow our businesses," said entrepreneur Chris Selkirk, aka "Tabasco Chris." "We're fortunate to have Cornell, Ag and Markets and the SSFPA there to help and provide support for our endeavors. Starting a small scale food processing business is quite an undertaking. These resources are invaluable. Everybody in our business has consulted with Olga and her staff at the Station. They're friendly and provide us with answers to all our



(l-r) Assemblyman Bill Magee, SSFPA president Dave Evans, Amanda Hewitt, CCE Oneida Co., and Olga Padilla-Zakour networked with smallscale food processors. CREDIT: Hickey/NYSAES/Cornell

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technical questions. Things would be a lot more difficult without them."

"The SSFPA conference was most informative. I hope that many of the networking ideas that were put forward not only in the overall meeting but also in the informal groups will materialize. It was a pleasure to become acquainted with so many enthusiastic processors and retailers," said Jae Sullivan, proprietor of Jae's Organic Food. "NECFE program's materials are very helpful for organizing all the key elements of a new business. Staff consultations cover any remaining questions. It is very valuable to be able to check out ideas and get advice from process authorities. Starting a business, no matter how well planned, is a giant leap of faith. It's comforting to feel that there's more experience behind you than whatever you can muster yourself."

Sullivan also praised the Station's Pilot Plant calling it crucial to the incubation needed to get a new business through the first few years. "Without the Pilot Plant facility, we would not have been able to start at all. Especially for processors who require more than a steam kettle, the range of equipment available in that one place is something that no small business could reproduce in its early years," Sullivan said.

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